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ABSTRACT

Jacques Ellul is widely known among sociologists and philosophers in the West for his analyses of the impact technology has on human society and humans themselves. Less well known is Ellul's deep interest in human life. Ellul's interest in these areas is evident in "Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes" (1965) and "The Humiliation of the Word" (1985). Of interest to students of rhetorical criticism, Ellul does divide propaganda into political and sociological types. Ellul is known for his searing attack on the technological mindset, "la technique," which he argues is a self-directing and self-augmenting entity. It is the technological mindset, he argues, that disrupts human reflectivity and the quality of human life. For Ellul, technology itself is merely an example of the problem rather than the problem itself. According to this theory, "la technique" has invaded the realm of politics and persuasion. Those responsible for public discussion of issues, such as the media systems and the government, now use the techniques of propaganda to override rational discourse and critical thinking. Ellul's contribution to rhetorical theory lies in his understanding that persuasion does not occur in a single isolated instance but in a whole social, cultural, and technological framework of society. Second, Ellul points out that persuasion is based on emotion and irrationality. In a society dominated by propaganda, rationality disappears. (Includes 46 notes.) (TB)

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Contributions of Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda* to Teaching and Research in Rhetorical Theory

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Jacques Ellul is widely known among sociologists and philosophers in the West for his insightful and intriguing analyses of the impact of technology on human society and humans themselves. Less well known is Ellul's deep interest in the role of communication, and more specifically, rhetorical action, in human life. This vital aspect of Ellul's work has been largely overlooked by communication scholars in that only one article exploring Ellul's theories and their relevance to the field of communication has been published in mainstream communication journals.[1]

This dearth of feedback to Ellul's arguments in the three decades that have elapsed since the initial publication of his works demonstrates that Ellul's arguments concerning communication in public life go unrecognized by communication scholars. Indeed, Ellul rarely draws from the rhetorical tradition himself, relying instead on communication scholars from the decades of the immediate post-war era. In several works, however, most notably Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes (1965) and The Humiliation of the Word (1985), Ellul's concern with rhetorical action is obvious.[2]

Ellul has clearly had a major impact on many fields, including sociology, philosophy, and critical theory, due primarily to The Technological Society.[3] In spite of early criticism regarding Ellul's methodology and his pessimism, much of which was misplaced, Ellul remains an enduring figure in recent Western intellectual circles. This essay will examine Ellul's possible contributions to rhetorical theory and criticism,

particularly his arguments concerning propaganda as rhetorical action. Hopefully, this project will contribute to a greater awareness of Ellul on the part of rhetorical scholars and teachers, as well as to encourage a critical engagement with his many contentions about the nature of human rhetorical action.

This essay will focus primarily on the arguments Ellul makes concerning human persuasion in his book Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes. The book is not entirely unknown among communication scholars. Marshall McLuhan, for example, writes of the book that Ellul brings to the forefront issues that are commonly ignored in a mad search for efficiency and method, and in a manner that is both insightful and poetic.[4] Jowett and O'Donnell briefly mention his work in their well-known text, Propaganda and Persuasion, but do not fully explore his views, and Ellul is given some prominence in a more recent interdisciplinary volume on propaganda.[5]

The book, however, deserves a greater audience among rhetorical scholars because of its relevance to a contemporary understanding of political and social life and influence. The focus of Propaganda is on the nexus between the technical mindset, political and social life, and communication. The central argument of the text is that the technological methods and mindset of the contemporary world both necessitate propaganda and contribute to the destruction of democracy, in that critical intelligence withers away under the influence of propaganda.[6] Rhetoric is replaced by clichés, half-truths, and symbolically powerful catchwords. Human discourse about values, goals, and

means is usurped by more linear, technically superior information delivery systems.

Upon publication of the book, it was severely criticized for both the "whiny" tone of the analysis, and for its glib use of evidence and empirical data. Daniel Lerner, for example, states that Ellul's work articulates "derivative, overstated, polemical propositions enunciated with great conviction."[7] Lerner further criticizes Ellul's "evasion of...data collection and data analysis," and argues that Ellul misuses the more recent tradition of empirical research.

Although Lerner's criticism is not without merit, it also illustrates Ellul's central thesis, which is that the mindset of 'technique' has so altered our perspective that we no longer trust non-empirical, or "non-scientific," studies. Lerner criticizes Ellul for not doing that which Ellul despises, that is, losing oneself in the bureaucratic value system of efficiency and quantification. One scholar noted that Ellul's harshest critics often beg the question, in that they "reflect the commonplaces that are technical consciousness."[8] Their criticisms are derived from the technological mindset to which Ellul objects. This is much like using German propaganda to support the superiority of the German nation. Other criticisms might legitimately be made of Ellul and his arguments. Before we make such a move, however, we must first closely examine his arguments in Propaganda.

La Technique, Propaganda, and Persuasion

Ellul is chiefly known for his searing attack on the technological mindset, *la technique*, which he argues is a self-

directing and self-augmenting entity. Once an area of human life is subjected to technical processes, the efficiency of those processes guarantees the eventual abdication of humanistic and moral criteria in favor of technical standards. A clear example of this is that moral decisions regarding nuclear missiles are now largely dominated by technicians, rather than being open to public discourse. Indeed, the discourse of nuclear defense experts is "carefully and intricately reasoned, occurring seemingly without any sense of horror, urgency or moral outrage."[9] The efficiency paradigm reigns, so that questions of moral value can never enter into the dialogue. Another example of the self-directing, self-augmenting nature of technology is the development of the atomic bomb; once the idea took hold, it became necessary that the bomb be completed, since it is the ultimately effective and efficient weapon. The efficiency paradigm at some level disqualifies moral discourse from public policy, leading directly or indirectly to moral outrages, such as the Nazi holocaust.[10]

Because Ellul has little appreciation for the technological mindset, he is often charged with being "anti-technology." This, however, is a misreading of Ellul. Central to all of Ellul's arguments is the conviction that it is *la technique*, or the technological mindset, that disrupts human reflectivity and the quality of human life. Technology is merely an example of the problem, it is not the problem itself.

This argument, developed primarily in The Technological Society, is the cornerstone for the argument developed in Propaganda. In the latter book, Ellul argues that *la technique*

has invaded the realm of politics and persuasion, and that those responsible for public discussion of issues, such as the media systems and the government, now use the techniques of propaganda to override rational discourse and critical thinking. The mass media has merged with an unrelenting social science, and thus has achieved a power over individuals unprecedented in human history.

Ellul defines propaganda as: "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization."[11] This definition clearly puts the emphasis on methodology, which can be put to any imaginable use. The methodologies of propaganda, however, extend far beyond the traditional ones identified in propaganda studies. All social influence in a modern, technical society, intentional or unintentional, is propagandistic, or ineffective. Ellul argues "the term [propaganda] supposes state action and also mass action on public opinion. However, the broader phenomenon we are considering here includes private action and individualized action as well."[12] Areas traditionally associated with persuasion, such as politics, education, religion, etc., have become infected with propaganda.

In fact, Ellul argues that there is little practical difference between propaganda and information. Information, in a modern, technological society, becomes omnipresent and overwhelms the individual. As the available information increases, it becomes more and more difficult to interpret. By providing ready-

made interpretations, the propagandists inject themselves into the deliberative processes of the social body.

Propaganda is most effective in certain social conditions. The first of these is the existence of an individualist society, where individuals are separated from the primary social groupings and loyalties that have traditionally provided social guidance and support in decision-making. Ellul sees these primary social groupings as vital sources of communal judgment and social support. The individual becomes completely responsible for herself, left entirely alone: "He is thrown entirely on his own resources; he can find criteria only in himself. . . He becomes the beginning and the end of everything. Before him there was nothing; after him there will be nothing. His own life becomes the only criterion of justice and injustice, of Good and Evil."[13] (sic)

. Separated from a local community that might counter the overwhelming authority of the mass media, such as churches, guilds, or villages, individuals begin to gravitate towards what Ellul terms a "mass society." They turn for information and opinions to the media, and in doing so are begin to take on a collective personality, forced to rely less on personal, private rationality and more on public opinion. Ellul argues: "When individuals are not held together by local structures, the only form in which they can live together is in an unstructured mass society."[14] Because of this type of social life, the individual is exposed to the power of propaganda as never before, in that

overwhelming social forces pressure the individual to rely on propaganda.

Propaganda is thus sociocultural in nature, rather than specifically rhetorical. Although Ellul draws upon and refers to the communication tradition of Laswell, Katz, and others, he rejects a view of propaganda as one particular type of communication, identified by specific methodologies and settings. Rather, every element of social life that has been invaded by technical processes reinforce the propaganda mechanisms. Propaganda is not a machine, but rather an organic system, where every element supports another in an unwavering growth.

Propaganda is the inevitable result of a scientific society, in that the processes inherent in a technologically advanced society create a social value of efficiency. Scientific discovery of human motivational forces, primarily from the fields of psychology, sociology, and human relations, provide the techniques which propaganda uses. These "sciences" exist for the value they provide in understanding and influencing humans.

Because propaganda rests upon this efficiency paradigm, it is scientific. It has been systematized and reduced to a set of rules and methodologies. When this powerful understanding of human motivation is merged with the totalizing nature of the mass media, the individual finds it very difficult to make independent judgment. "The propagandist must utilize all of the technical means at his disposal - the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door - to - door canvassing."[15] When the same messages are found on every channel, the propaganda is most effective.

Ellul identifies several major distinctions within propaganda, but it seems that three of these have the greatest relevance to students of rhetorical criticism. The first distinction is based upon the context and methods of the propaganda, and Ellul identifies the two types as political and sociological propaganda. Political propaganda is easily identified, and is the traditional focus of propaganda studies. It has clear goals, methodologies, and artifacts.

Sociological propaganda, however, is often not recognized for what it is, because in many ways it is the exact reverse of political propaganda. Ellul argues that sociological propaganda is "the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context."[16] The sociological, cultural, and economic structures impose and reinforce ideology through much more subtle means. It rarely involves deliberate action and is typically seen as non-political. An example would be popular entertainment, or even social marketing, which assumes ideological or cultural stances and perpetuates them unself-consciously.

Ellul also recognizes a distinction between the purposes of propaganda, that of agitation and that of integration. Propaganda of agitation is often easily recognizable, in that it is usually subversive and precipitates social, cultural, economic, or political change. It is typically based on hatred, which Ellul identifies as the most "spontaneous and common sentiment; it consists of attributing one's misfortune to 'another,' who must be killed in order to assure the disappearance of those misfortunes and sins."[17]

Propaganda of integration, however, has a different aim, that of stabilizing, unifying, and reinforcing the social body. Ellul is most interested in this type of propaganda and argues that it is the most significant in the contemporary age. Integration propaganda is most effective in a comfortable, cultivated, and informed milieu, and most effective among those who are traditionally considered resistant to it: "Intellectuals are more sensitive than peasants to integration propaganda. In fact, they share the stereotypes of a society even when they are political opponents of the society."[18] One reason for the openness of intellectuals to propaganda, Ellul argues, is that they are expected to have opinions on matters of little personal interest, and therefore rely more heavily on the media as an "information shortcut."

Finally, Ellul recognizes a distinction between vertical and horizontal propagandas. Vertical propaganda, again, is easily recognized, and typically is a campaign from the leaders to the masses of a society. Horizontal propaganda is much less hierarchical, and finds its effectiveness in the group socializing process. It is created within a group, rather than from above, and visible leadership is kept to a minimum. Propaganda pressures are democratized, hiding the authority dimensions of the social pressures. Ellul cites as example the role of groups in instituting social change in China. Other communication scholars have noted the rhetorical power of this type of propaganda, such as Godwin Chu's classic study on social influence using small groups.[19]

Ellul, along with later propaganda scholars, recognizes that propaganda relies not on untruth or exaggeration as much as truth, although a carefully edited truth. Propaganda has its irrational side, but also its rational. In fact, it is the rational character of propaganda that makes intellectuals rely on it all the more. Ellul argues "much of the information disseminated nowadays - research findings, facts, statistics, explanations, analyses - eliminate personal judgment and the capacity to form one's own opinion even more surely than the most extravagant propaganda."[20] To whatever degree the individual relies on the judgments of the mass society, based on facts, statistics, and information, rather than independent or locally accountable judgment, that individual has succumbed to propaganda.

Even the intellectuals give way to propaganda, Ellul argues, because the educational system itself functions as "pre-propaganda," preparing individuals to respond to propaganda. The uneducated and illiterate peasant is safer from the effects of propaganda than one whose values and outlook have been shaped by a modern education, because they are less likely to rely on the judgments of others. Furthermore, intellectuals are prone to propaganda because they are less likely to believe that it can influence them. "Because he is convinced of his own superiority, the intellectual is much more vulnerable than anybody else in this maneuver."[21] Although a high level of education is the best means of combating propaganda, the intellectuals rely on propaganda because it becomes a ready made opinion, which the intellectual is expected to have.

As we have seen, Ellul is not as concerned with the form, or the format, of the propaganda as much as he is concerned about the impact of it. According to Ellul, propaganda is as propaganda does. And what propaganda does is not merely to move people to immediate action, but to entirely transform both human psychology and social relationships. Ellul argues that propaganda ultimately debilitates any society once it has begun, in that the individual loses individual judgment and creativity. "What is it that propaganda makes disappear? Everything in the nature of critical and personal judgment."[22] After becoming acclimated to propaganda, the individual can no longer truly dissent. "His (sic) imagination will lead only to small digressions from the fixed line and to only slightly deviate, preliminary responses *within* the framework."[23]

At the social level, the consequences are disastrous. Democratic societies must use propaganda to maintain sovereignty, but in doing so, betray the very idea of democracy; that is, individuals being given the capacity to impact the social system for their own self-interest. Ideologies, including democratic ones, become mere tools of the propaganda mechanisms which dominate social life and to mobilize the society. "The only problem is that of effectiveness, of utility. The point is not to ask oneself whether some economic or intellectual doctrine is valid, but only whether it can furnish effective catchwords capable of mobilizing the masses *here and now*."[24] Propaganda's task is to mobilize individuals, and uses whatever tools,

ideological, economic, or political, will best bring about that result. The outcome is a disregard for truth and validity.

An equally important consequence of propaganda is the destruction of public discourse. Issues traditionally associated with rhetoric, such as politics, values, and social life, have been appropriated into the realm of the mass media, and there is little role left for traditional conceptions of persuasion. The critical element so necessary for persuasive discourse has been lost, leaving an audience responsive to mere stimuli. Moreover, the individual or community is left with no resources with which to counter the overwhelming power of propaganda. Not only is there little critical judgment, but information is largely controlled by the propaganda systems. The only dissent is channeled into irrelevant issues. The basic values of the society remain unquestioned, and what little clash remains is merely ornamental.

This, then, is the major framework that Ellul establishes for the study of propaganda. Given the importance Ellul posits for communication processes, why is it that Ellul's work has been largely overlooked within the communication field, and even more so within the field of rhetorical inquiry? There are a variety of possible reasons for this, and it is helpful for us to understand these before we move into a fuller discussion of possible contributions Ellul might make to our understanding of propaganda.

J. Michael Sproule, in an insightful investigation of the "propaganda paradigm" in modern social sciences, traces the rise and fall of an invisible college of propaganda researchers from

various fields, including political science, sociology, and psychology, which provides some clues as to why Ellul's book did not make a more significant impact on rhetorical studies.[25] Sproule argues that propaganda analysis became the standard social science framework for rhetorical inquiry during the 1930's and '40's, but was unable to sustain its position because of both inherent weaknesses in the theoretical conception underlying the analysis and a movement towards more specialization in communications research.

Sproule argues that early propaganda research was largely humanistic and critical, but that political and economic pressures facing scholars during the 1950's and 60's led scholars to largely abandon the area. Many, if not most, communication scholars abandoned humanistic studies in favor of more methodological types of inquiry: "the rationale and paradigmatic starting point of communication research was methodology."[26] The social scientific researchers assumed ascendancy as a more "scientific" approach to the study of human influence. Largely as a result of this trend, communication scholars attempted to distance themselves from the critical, humanistic tradition of propaganda analysis in social science. Sproule also argues that the propaganda analysis scholars, being unaware of the theoretical resources of the rhetorical tradition, were largely bereft of sophisticated theoretical accounts for propaganda, and this theoretical paucity contributed to its decline.

If Sproule's contentions are true, then it is reasonable to argue that one reason for Ellul's limited impact on propaganda

studies is that the area of rhetorical scholarship focused on propaganda analysis was largely in decline or dormant by the time his book was published. Scholars with a social scientific bent took exception to the humanistic, critical approach of the book, and dismissed it, in much the same manner as Daniel Lerner's review, cited earlier. Others argued that Ellul's contentions were tautological, assuming the power of propaganda to then prove it.

Sproule argues in another essay that there have been at least four different responses to propaganda analysis, including both a humanistic, critical stance, as well as a scientific response.[27] The tension between these two types of scholarship could be one factor in Ellul's dismissal. Rhetorical scholars, then in decline, failed to notice Ellul, while social scientific communication researchers, who had largely inherited the propaganda studies tradition, dismissed his arguments on methodological grounds.

As we stated earlier, the move towards more empirical, "scientific" analysis clearly demonstrates Ellul's major contention, that efficiency and technique become self-directing and self-augmenting. For scholars to dismiss him on the basis of his lack of methodological and technical sophistication is in a sense the very vindication of his argument. It is his critics who argue in a tautology, assuming the superiority of empirical methods to denounce his suspicion of empiricism, specialization, and technique.

Regardless of the response of the community of rhetorical and communication scholars to Ellul, and whether or not all of Ellul's major contentions are valid, his work surely has significant major implications for the study of rhetorical theory and criticism. His arguments concerning human persuasion and rhetorical inquiry in a technological society bear directly upon important issues in rhetorical theory. In the final section of this essay, we will make some preliminary assessments of Ellul's relevance to rhetorical studies as well as suggest some possible contributions of the rhetorical tradition to Ellul's analysis.

Ellul's Contributions to Rhetorical Theory

In examining Ellul's views of human persuasion, it immediately becomes apparent that he would be discontent with a rhetorical theory which focuses its attention on single rhetorical devices, such as speeches or documents. Persuasion, for Ellul, does not occur in a single isolated instance, but in the whole social, cultural, and technological framework of the society. To this extent, Ellul's analysis is largely consistent with recent critical studies. To examine the rhetorical artifact without a corresponding analysis of the entire social propaganda network would completely misread the nature of the propaganda. In Ellul's expanded view of propaganda as being part of the very warp and woof of society, to locate a particular rhetorical artifact would be to decontextualize it so that it no longer has meaning. Traditional rhetorical criticism of single texts or documents could only work on the basis of synecdoche, as one element

standing for the entire social fabric in which it finds its meaning and its power.

This expanded definition of propaganda is also problematic, however. As Jowett and O'Donnell argue, "in order to analyze propaganda one needs to be able to recognize it."[28] An overly inclusive definition of propaganda gives us little help in understanding, analyzing, and combating it. However, Ellul does, seem to present a convincing case that a traditional focus on a narrow band of political communication called "propaganda" fails to take into account the overwhelming rhetorical power of "non-persuasive" elements of the social system.

Moreover, a focus on a particular attempt at persuasion fails to recognize the impact of that particular attempt within a larger context of propaganda. A speech is compelling, not because of what is in it, but because it conforms to a thousand other stimuli. Ellul loudly criticizes previous propaganda scholarship which fails to take the total environment of the person into account. To expand a well-known proverb, if a lie is told enough times, in a variety of ways, through a variety of channels, it becomes the truth.

A second issue to which Ellul calls our attention concerns the role of rationality in human persuasion. If propaganda is, as Ellul says, merely a means of galvanizing action, it is no longer the rational art once presumed. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion, but presumed that the audience was a rational one, capable of critical personal analysis. In Aristotle's view,

rhetoric, as the counterpart of dialectic, is most clearly constituted by modes of reasoning and rational argumentation: the syllogism, the enthymeme, etc. All of the artifices of artistic appeals are clearly secondary. Political oratory, in particular, is not prone to abuses because "the man who is forming a judgment is making a decision about his own vital interests," and is fully competent to do so.[29] Although there have been rhetorical theorists who dissented (for example, the sophist Gorgias), the rhetorical tradition has largely supported this view.

Of course, rhetorical scholars have always maintained that some degree of persuasion rests on irrational elements. For example, rhetoricians for much of our history have argued that persuasion rested on using logic to convince, but using emotions to move. However, rationality remained a key constituent of human influence.

In contrast, Ellul argues that in a society dominated by propaganda, rationality disappears. Individuals are not competent to make their own decisions because they have been stripped of the critical faculty, the social networks, and the personal information necessary for such decisions. Rationality is merely another tool for the propagandist, and there is no inherent rationality to persuasion.

Along with this low view of human rationality in persuasion, Ellul contends that the goal of propaganda is not conviction or belief, traditionally conceived of as derivative of rationality, but rather action. In the modern technological society, what is most important is the mobilization of the society. This

mobilization has no specific goal, but is mobilization for its own sake. Ellul argues:

> To view propaganda as still being what it was in 1850 is to cling to an obsolete concept of man and of the means to influence him,...The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief....To be effective, propaganda must constantly short-circuit all thought and decision.[30]

Since the goal of propaganda is not thought but action, then rationality and irrationality are equally valid tools. When rationality is most compelling, the propagandist will willingly use it. When irrationality is most compelling, it also will be used without hesitation. Thinking no longer competes with or deconstructs propaganda, but propaganda short-circuits thought. It is not necessary to change opinions, but merely to acknowledge them and use them as powerful tools. In fact, an effective propaganda will arouse action which has little if any grounding in convictions. Propaganda "leaves man complete freedom of thought except in his political or social action where we find him channeled and engaged in actions that do not necessarily conform to his private beliefs."[31]

The conviction that persuasion aims at action is also not new to rhetorical theory. Augustine argued in the fourth century that

the goal of true rhetoric ought not to be a change of mind, but rather a change of heart demonstrated by a change of action. "They indicated by applause that they were being taught or pleased, but tears indicated that they were persuaded."[32] Still, Augustine operated from presumption that the mind and the will both had to be engaged to move to action. Where Ellul's argument differs is in his contention that thought, attitudes, and beliefs can be totally divorced from action; indeed, that propaganda necessitates this divorce. He attempts to convince us that this fracture has indeed occurred, to the detriment of discourse.

In all of this, Ellul denies that he has a simplistic or mechanical view of humans. He clearly states, "we do not say that any man can be made to obey any incitement to action in any way whatever one day from the next."[33] Instead, people must be carefully conditioned in reflex as well as mythology, what Ellul defines as an all-encompassing, activating image. When the assumptions, stereotypes and values have been established in a society through education through pre-propaganda, then the propagandist can use mythic images and visions to mobilize individuals. When the necessary preconditioning has not occurred, the propagandist is limited in what can be accomplished. As long as an individual has access to independent information, judgment, and social affirmation, propaganda loses effectiveness.

Furthermore, Ellul argues that "we can conclude from a large body of evidence that the propagandist cannot go contrary to what is in an individual; he cannot create just any new psychological mechanism or obtain just any decision or action."[34] But, by

understanding what is in the individual, and exploiting those fears and the myths, the propagandist can bring about a total transformation.

Ellul openly acknowledges the opposition of propaganda to traditional conceptions of discourse and democracy and argues that democracy is indeed subverted in the modern world:

> For it is evident that a conflict exists between the principles of democracy - particularly its concept of the individual - and the processes of propaganda. The notion of rational man, capable of thinking and living according to reason, of controlling his passions and living according to scientific patters, of choosing freely between good and evil - all this seems opposed to the secret influences, the mobilizations of myths, the swift appeals to the irrational, so characteristic of propaganda.[35]

Rhetorical theorists would certainly reject what seems to be a terribly reductionistic view of human nature, and argue that human motivations are complex and simply not reducible to any primate inner being, but also acknowledge that humans often act unreflectively, and even the most educated defer to what they perceive (rightly or wrongly) as a greater judgment. We do not have to agree completely with Ellul's understanding of the power of propaganda to acknowledge its very real effects. A vivid, if ironic, example of the power of propaganda upon an educated society is an advertisement directly next to a review of Ellul's book in the March 6, 1966 edition of the *New York Times Book Review*. The advertisement, for the *Christian Science Monitor*,

vividly illustrates Ellul's contentions about how information overload leads us to rely solely upon the mass media for far more than just information. In short, the copy of the ad reads:

> I like the way this paper takes a constructive look at things. It gives me a real understanding of politics, foreign affairs, race relations, business. And it covers sports, too. And my wife likes the way it deals with fashions and entertainment. I know we both feel a lot more sure of ourselves when we're talking about almost any subject. As a matter of fact, we find we have more to talk about....It's good to be treated like a responsible, decent grown-up - that's the way this paper treats me every time it comes into my home.[36]

It would be difficult to find a clearer example of Ellul's point, that a major shift has occurred in our reliance upon the channels of mass media and the propaganda contained within them. The copy for the ad demonstrates a reliance on media systems, or propaganda, for opinions on subjects as varied as fashion, sports, and foreign affairs. The newspaper becomes personalized, with wisdom, insight, and humor. It is treated not as a source of (probably biased) information, but as an advisor, mentor, and friend. A newspaper provides confidence, security, and ready-made opinions on virtually every aspect of human life.

Another issue that Ellul raises that rhetorical scholars must engage is the power of propaganda in a specialized, fractured society. Ellul concedes that where there is true dissent, propaganda can only have limited effectiveness. Only when

propaganda is centralized and totalized can it completely dominate human thought. Insofar as propaganda can become the basis of our thought and action, however, it achieves its purposes beautifully. Many critical theorists and media critics also argue about the devastating impact of monopolistic practices in the media, but in the West, most of the media systems are privatized to some degree, thus seeming to nullify Ellul's argument about the power of propaganda. In addition, there are clear trends towards specialization, not centralization, in media systems. Doesn't this also negate Ellul's contentions about the necessity of centralization?

Ellul's response would be that the media systems need not be unified in ownership or collectivized, but merely that they be unified in purpose and outlook. If all 500 cable channels, and all of the radio broadcasts, and all of the newspapers, affirm certain basic sociological and cultural assumptions and stereotypes, it matters not who owns or controls them. The fact that none of the channels challenge any underlying cultural and political assumptions reinforces their unquestioning acceptance.

Some would argue that Ellul's thesis illustrates the need to increase the diversity in a society, by means of multiculturalism, for example. Although Ellul affirms the value of true diversity in combating propaganda, he also is suspicious of the homogenizing forces of the technological society. It is the technological society itself that establishes the order of the day. Ideologies are merely fodder for the process of mobilizing persons. Ellul would certainly find ludicrous the idea that the government can

introduce any meaningful dissent. Instead, he would argue, I believe, that this is merely an ornamental dissent.

Moreover, the partitioning of society can itself be a result of propaganda. He argues that "the more propaganda there is, the more partitioning there is."[37] This partitioning actually increases the hold of propaganda, in that "those who read the press of their own group and listen to the radio of their own group are constantly reinforced in their convictions....As a result, people ignore each other more and more."[38] Dissent becomes buried, and thus invisible, with no power to counter the overwhelming propaganda systems. Propaganda not only unifies, it skillfully divides between groups so as to make real independent judgment impossible.

Another issue that needs to be addressed by rhetorical scholars is the issue of whether or not in fact *la technique* is as insidious a process as Ellul claims. Ellul himself addresses this most fully in The Technological Society. He does not argue that technique has only become important in the last several hundred years, but that the merging of modern scientific methodologies with technique has insidious implications. In addition, the plasticity of the social order, by which Ellul means the disappearance of taboo and the breakdown of primary social groupings, gave technique unprecedented power to affect human life.[39] Previous centuries of technique had been bound to machinations and manipulations of the material world (or perhaps spiritual, if magic is included). But when it is given rein over

human life and human interaction, *la technique* gains power as well as proficiency.

In many ways, the history of rhetorical theory contains a great deal of discussion about technique, and in fact, several periods of rhetorical theory have consisted almost exclusively of technique with little emphasis on the philosophical and moral grounds of human persuasion. Plato's arguments against the sophists followed much the same line as Ellul's, that the sophists manipulated rhetorical techniques with little, if any, regard for truth, justice, or the dignity of the individual. In this regard, Ellul is hardly saying anything new, but merely reminding us of the ethical dimensions of applying technique to human influence.

In fact, there is some immediate correspondence between Ellul's arguments and recent writings on rhetorical theory in identifying technique. For example, he argues that one of the prime rhetorical motives inherent in propaganda is that of scapegoating rivals in order to provide self-justification, similar to Kenneth Burke's writings on victimage.[40] Ellul argues: "It is extremely easy to launch a revolutionary movement based on hatred of a particular enemy....it consists of attributing one's misfortunes and sins to 'another' who must be killed in order to assure the disappearance of those misfortunes and sins."[41] Both would agree that the victim-enemy-scapegoat motif provides tremendous psychological relief, and thus becomes a compelling motive for action. The psychological mechanisms inherent in persuasion might not always result from rationalistic impulses.

Ellul acknowledges the universal use of technique, but argues that developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have made modern technique much more insidious. The rise of the mass media and the entry into the inner life of the psyche made by the social sciences, along with the other social factors brought about in the nineteenth and twentieth century, makes possible the use of the techniques of persuasion on a large scale. Individuals are now subjected to the techniques of propaganda constantly, and cannot escape this influence simply by leaving the room. The common response to criticisms of the mass media that "you don't have to listen," does not apply, because one does have to listen, given the totalizing influence of the media. If one chooses not to view this channel, the same message will be reinforced through every other channel.

Kenneth Burke argues that technique is endemic to human life, in that humans are "tool-using animals" in our very nature. Moreover, I think that Burke would agree that those tools can radically alter our relationships to each other and to nature. Burke writes: "The implements of hunting and husbandry, with corresponding implements of war, make for a set of habits that become a kind of 'second nature,' as a special set of expectations, shaped by custom, comes to seem 'natural.'"[42] Burke's analysis does not seem to suggest the same dire predictions associated with "tools/techniques", however.

Perhaps Ellul's argument about the ever encroaching technique on human life is best confirmed by propaganda studies as a field. We previously referred to the "paradigm shift" traced by Sproule

in the area of human persuasion and influence. The humanistic, qualitative methodologies and philosophies were eclipsed in importance by paradigms which found their popularity in their methodological, "scientific" character. Walter Fisher argues much the same point: "The 'demotion' of philosophy was a concomitant of a new theory of knowledge - that knowledge concerns the physical world and is strictly empirical."[43] Ethical and moral concerns clearly became secondary, as did the philosophical, contemplative approach to the study of human communication. What Fisher (and others) see as the rise of empiricism, Ellul identifies as *la technique*. Both agree that this trend led to a situation in which logic is divorced from discourse, values are divorced from knowledge, and "experts" are privileged.[44] Thus, the history of the field of communication illustrates Ellul's central thesis.

Finally, I would like to add a brief word about one other possible contribution rhetorical theory might make towards a fuller understanding of Ellul's arguments. Although Ellul is often criticized for offering no specific solutions to the problems generated by propaganda, he does in fact do so in several later works.[45] Ellul does seem to believe that the overwhelming power of the technological society and propaganda can be countered by individuals willing to live a radically different kind of life, and, on a more social level, by discourse: "Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins."[46] Were the traditional rhetorical concerns to be reintroduced in society in any meaningful way, the value of critical thinking, of engaging the audience at an individual and local level, as opposed to the mass level, of

tailoring persuasive messages according at both rational and non-rational levels, then social influence can again become personal, engaged, and critical. Unfortunately, the very efficiency of the modern communications systems seem to undermine this purpose.

I began this essay by arguing that the response of the rhetorical discipline to Ellul has been less than satisfactory, and a great deal more needs to be done to explore the possible interfaces between Ellul's vision of human influence and the rhetorical tradition. We have only begun to identify here on a surface level several areas of immediate possible engagement: the expanded role of propaganda in human life, the decline of an expectancy of rationality in persuasion, the goals of action over conviction, and the role of technique in either contributing to or enhancing human life. Rhetorical scholars would do well to engage Ellul on these points, and to extend their critique and analysis far beyond these preliminary junctures.

Ellul does a great service to the rhetorical theorist by both affirming the role of influence in human life as well as arguing with many of our basic beliefs. He challenges our assumptions about the nature of persuasion and rationality, he probes our understandings about the relationship of propaganda to conviction, and he questions our presuppositions about the innocence of technique. Ellul berates our suppositions about the nature of freedom and technology, and he battles with our presumptions about the spread of omnipresent communication devices and the mass media. Above all of these, however, Ellul restores questions of

human dignity, quality of life, and the value of the individual to serious discussions of rhetoric, persuasion, and human influence.

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[1]Clifford G. Christians and Michael R. Real, "Jacques Ellul's Contributions to Critical Media Theory," *Journal of Communication*, (1979) 83-93. The same authors have included a chapter on Ellul and Mass Communications in an interpretive work on Ellul. See Michael R. Real, "Mass Communications and Propaganda in Technological Societies," in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, Eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981) 108-127.

[2]*Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A, Knopf, 1965). All subsequent citations will be to the Vintage Books edition, 1973; *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985)

[3](New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

[4]Marshall McLuhan, "Big Transistor is Watching You," (Book Review) *Book Week*, 28 November 1965, p. 5.

[5]Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion, 2nd Edition*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992); Ted J. Smith, III, Ed. *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective* (New York: Praeger Press, 1989).

[6]Christopher Lasch, "A Profusion of Information" (Book Review) *The Nation*, 4 April, 1966, 398.

[7]Daniel Lerner, "Propagandes," (Book Review) *American Sociological Review* 29 (1964) 793-794.

[8]David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991), 38.

[9]Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* , 12 (1987).

[10]Steven B. Katz, "The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust," *College English*, 54 (1992) 255-274.

[11]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 61.

[12]Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 363.

[13]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 92

[14]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 90

[15]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 9.

[16]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 63

[17]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 73

[18]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 76

[19]Godwin Chu, *Radical Change through Communication in China*. (Honolulu: East West Center, 1977).

[20]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 87

[21]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 111.

[22]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 169.

[23]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 169.
[24]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 197.
[25]J. Michael Sproule, "Propaganda Studies in American Social Science: The Rise and Fall of the Critical Paradigm," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73 (1987): 60-78.
[26]Sproule, p. 68.
[27]Michael J. Sproule, "Social Responses to Twentieth Century Propaganda," in Smith.
[28]Jowett and O'Donnell, p. 3.
[29]Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, (New York: Modern Library, 1984) 21.
[30]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 25-27.
[31]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 28
[32]St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 160.
[33]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 30
[34]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 33.
[35]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 233.
[36]*New York Times Book Review* (6 March 1966), 41.
[37]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 213.
[38]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 213.
[39]*The Technological Society*, p. 49.
[40]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 168; *The Technological Society*, 367. See also Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 265-66.
[41]*Propaganda*, 73.
[42]Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 13.
[43]Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) 8.
[44]Fisher, 9.
[45]Clifford G. Christians, "Ellul on Solution: An Alternative but no Prophecy," in Christians and Van Hook.
[46]Ellul, *Propaganda*, 6